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ABSTRACT

Curriculum criticism, an alternative to traditional modes of educational inquiry, encourages researchers and evaluators to respect the unique and non-replicable qualities of school training. It assumes an analogy between the curriculum (as lived-in experience) and a work of art (which offers an immediate experience to viewers). The curriculum critic serves as translator between the work and less informed viewers. Some limitations of the method are that it produces only a selective portrayal of educational situations, it presumes analogies between art critics and curriculum critics which may not always be justified, its role may be less welcome in education than in the arts, and it invites charges of elitism which reduce its appeal in many circles. These limitations, however, are no more severe than those of other forms of educational inquiry. Part of the task of adherents to curriculum criticism is to establish their credibility among various publics and to produce enough examples of criticism that its utility can be fairly assessed. (Author/KC)

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THE CRITIC'S PERSPECTIVE: SOME STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF AESTHETIC CRITICISM IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Curriculum criticism, as an alternative to traditional quantitative modes of educational inquiry, encourages researchers and evaluators to respect the unique and non-replicable qualities of schooling. It assumes an analogy between the curriculum (as a lived-in experience) and a work of art (which offers an immediate experience to viewers); the curriculum critic, like the art critic, serves as translator between the work and less informed viewers. Two limitations to curriculum criticism refer to flaws in the analogy between the curriculum and a work of art and to limitations on educational discourse that are not shared by art criticism. The limitations serve to remind us that curriculum criticism can never be expected to provide all the information needed in making decisions about curricula, but the limitations are no more severe than those of other forms of educational inquiry. Part of the task of adherents of curriculum criticism is to establish their credibility among their various publics, and to produce enough examples of criticism that its utility can be fairly assessed.

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Introduction: the role of the critic

"Criticism is judgment", as John Dewey (1958) observed several decades ago, and in that statement lie both the value and the danger of what we have come to call curriculum criticism. Though Dewey was content to understand the contribution of art and art criticism without creating a new discipline wedding them to the needs of educators, we in the last decade or so have seen fit to develop a new rubric and a new approach. In the dozen years since John S. Mann (1969) first used the term "curriculum criticism", a small but devoted army of educators has gone forth to proclaim and to demonstrate the values of an approach to educational inquiry which is variously called educational criticism, curriculum criticism, aesthetic criticism in education (I will use these terms interchangeably here) -- all fairly clearly aligned with a broader movement favoring qualitative inquiry in education. The adherents of this approach have made considerable headway among educational researchers. This paper offers an assessment and a critique of educational criticism from the point of view of a believer who also believes that a reexamination of the rhetoric is overdue. Curriculum criticism has much to offer us all; it also poses some problems which must be addressed if it is to be as fruitful as we hope.

If criticism is judgment, it is important to state that this function is one which is shared by most forms of curriculum inquiry. Ultimately what we are seeking in our various studies of the curriculum is a body of data (hard or soft) which will facilitate the practical judgments that need making about the curriculum. Most of us involved in the curriculum in any way -- from

the perspective of the curriculum developer, teacher, principal, school board member, parent, student, or general taxpayer -- are offering judgments most of the time. We present them as informed judgments, implying that they are backed by a coherent body of evidence which argues our side of the case; sometimes they are, but sometimes they are not. In our deliberations and debates about curriculum content, goals, and form, we welcome evidence which will inform and enlighten the judgments we cannot avoid making. There are many forms of evidence available to us; these include formal evaluations, committee recommendations, reports of prior users, student background data, publishers' claims, teachers' reports, financial constraints, other curricula in use in our district, and so on. Curriculum-criticism advocates argue that criticism based on aesthetic principles could inform our judgments even better, if we would would but listen and heed. What, then, is curriculum criticism, and what can it offer us?

Let us consider first what an art critic does and why his or her activity is useful to anyone. Much has been written about the role of criticism, and I will not recapitulate these arguments here. Avid readers are referred to my own dissertation (as a starter) for a more thorough discussion of the aesthetic argument for criticism (Vallance 1975). Suffice it to say that the art critic -- the critic of painting, photography, dance, theater, music -- serves as a bridge between the work(s) of art in question and that portion of the public which is just sufficiently "untutored" to consider itself in need of the guidance that the critic offers.* The critic, through whatever credentials he or she may have established, is someone to whom art

*(We can assume that the truly untutored-to-the-point-of-uncaring audience will neither read nor benefit by criticism; those people who consider themselves fully erudite may well ignore critics, though I've encountered few who are that uninterested in others' perceptions or art. The critic's audience is those who are at all open to learning about the arts, whatever their degree of tutelage might be.)

makes sense, or who is at least willing to analyze it until it does. The critic is an informed viewer, whose experience of the artwork in question is one which results in some communicable sense of the order, the dominant theme, the beauty (or lack thereof), and the contributors to these qualities of the work of art. The critic is the individual who -- for whatever reasons -- can grasp the essential qualities of a work of art and communicate them in ordinary language to others, who on their own may not be so capable. In Max Kozloff's (1968) words and Susan Langer's (1957) conceptualization, the critic "renders" the experience he or she has had with the work of art into another medium -- ordinary language -- which makes the work accessible to less informed viewers.

The critic, then, functions as a bridge and as a translator. The critic applies analytical and appreciative skills to his/her experience of a work of art in order to identify and communicate the elements of order that are present there. In doing so, the critic is necessarily selective. He may focus largely on the composition of a painting, for example, referring to color only where necessary to enhance the point; she may emphasize the visual rhythms of a modern dance piece, referring to story line or music only to support that argument. She may emphasize the sense of motion created in one series of paintings, or the color juxtapositions in another. Always the critic is selecting that portion of the aesthetic experience which best accounts for the essence of the "lived-in" experience offered by the work of art. The judgment is based on that selection of evidence; it is to the readers to then see for themselves whether the critic's vision seems justified by the evidence of the actual works. The critic attempts to prefigure the reader's experience, focusing on those elements

of it which are most likely to have an impact on the viewer; the critic suggests a way of understanding the piece.

Because he or she necessarily renders a judgment, based on a presentation of the data available from the work of art, the critic assists the untutored viewer to come to a judgment as well. By identifying the salient characteristics of the work and presenting them in a fashion that communicates its underlying order, the critic makes the work accessible to the judgment of others. The critic's presentation of the complex elements of an abstract painting may be more readily comprehensible than the apparently-random elements of the painting itself. The critic provides descriptive and interpretive data which remain available to others as the basis of their own (perhaps different) judgments.

The argument for a synthesis of aesthetic criticism and curriculum discourse is founded upon a concern for the complexity of curricular problems and an acknowledgment that educational phenomena cannot be understood from any single viewpoint. The peculiar, ineffable, and non-repeating qualities of classrooms and curricular encounters are not capturable by scientifically-construed inquiry which seeks generalizable rules and recurring patterns; criticism, in its sensitivity to the particular qualities of particular human artifacts, offers a perspective which more traditional inquiry models ignore. The critic's sensitivity to unique and special arrangements of "data" is especially suited to understanding those qualities of schooling which escape the more standardized quantitative and experimental approaches to education. Criticism, it is argued, can help us to see the qualities (and value) of the lived-in experience offered by the curriculum, much as the art critic attempts to help us see the experience offered by the work of art.

The recent interest in a specifically curricular criticism began over a decade ago with an article by John Mann (1969), who first used the term "curriculum criticism", to my knowledge; it is the title of his paper. Mann, Westbury (1970) and Kelly (1973) suggested that we evaluate curricula as though they were works of art, each with its own internal order which can be assessed on its own merits. These papers were focused on the curriculum as a work of art itself, and addressed its art-like qualities specifically. Elliot Eisner's development of the concept he calls "connoisseurship" (1975) followed closely on his work criticizing the behavioral-objectives movement; central to the concept of connoisseurship is the argument that schooling and the curriculum are complex, subtle, and colored by qualities which are unique to each individual classroom. Connoisseurship describes the critic's attitude as much as anything; it argues for an approach to the curriculum which refuses to be seduced by the persuasive simplicities of experimental method. Connoisseurship would require that to study the curriculum we become, in effect, critics ourselves, attuned to the peculiar qualities of each curricular situation. The connoisseur must above all be informed, sensitive, articulate, and open to the unexpected.

Aligned with the recent interest in curriculum criticism is a more general movement toward what is called qualitative inquiry, distinguished from traditional quantitative inquiry by its focus on the nonmeasurable aspects ("qualities") of schooling. Qualitative inquiry includes research approaches drawn from aesthetic criticism, but it also embraces educational ethnography (a solid tradition rejuvenated by this new view of its value), "new journalism" methodologies, and (in its looser configuration) a whole range of hermeneutical and philosophical studies of the curriculum and its role. Qualitative inquiry permits the researcher to study those aspects of schooling which measurement and replicability would discount,

and to report its findings in a language other than the "objective" and depersonalized grammar that experimental method has taught us. Through the recent interest in qualitative inquiry in education, the humanities and the lessons they provide have been dusted off and presented in a shiny new format as the vehicle by which the human and ethical qualities of education can be explored.

But educational criticism has been faulted by many, for its premises are foreign to most social science researchers. Furthermore, the rhetoric of curriculum criticism rather easily gets away with itself; its adherents talk to each other a lot, not necessarily talking to teachers or even doing much criticism. While this sort of activity is necessary to the development of a new perspective, it is reasonable to suggest that we now need to step back and look at the limitations of curriculum criticism before we become so enamored of it that we lose perspective. It behooves us to ask what curriculum criticism can and cannot do for us and why. As a second-generation curriculum critic (student of Eisner), I offer my view in the remainder of this paper.

Some limitations of curriculum criticsm

The limitations of curriculum criticism lie in two areas -- one focuses on the concept of the work of art as an experience, the other focuses on the special role assigned to the curriculum critic. We will deal with these in turn.

There are at least three obvious limitations to the assumption that the curriculum can be viewed as a work of art offering a "lived-in" experience to the participant. The first is one which all critics implicitly recognize and adjust to: the experience of the work of art is complex and cannot be

rendered in its entirety in words. Thus, the critic must be selective, identifying a salient subset of aesthetic qualities; the critic may refer primarily to color or to composition or to rhythm or to dissonance, but not equally to all. The critic's portrayal of a work of art (or curriculum) is necessarily focused, filtered by the critic's sensibilities and reflecting that set of qualities which together comprise the salient features of the experience for him or her. As a result, no single piece of criticism ever tells us everything we may "need" to know about a work. Any given critical essay may legitimately ignore the history of the work, biographical details about the artist, political context of the style, or the artist's "intentions". For a complete understanding of any work of art we will need more than a single piece of criticism; we may well need several, as well as studies of the socio-cultural milieu of the artist and technical data on the media employed. Educational criticism, likewise, is likely to be incomplete, presenting only one view of a curriculum and necessarily ignoring others (including, even, the "intentions" or professed objectives of the materials). To fully understand the experience and impact of a given curriculum in a given classroom setting, we would need information on the teacher, his/her training, the political context in which the curriculum was implemented, students' background and prior training, school climate, and a host of other variables. Though curriculum criticism may claim to be attuned to the peculiar and ineffable qualities of schooling, any suggestion that this picture of schooling is somehow therefore "truer" or more insightful than other views is misleading. And though few adherents of curriculum criticism actually claim this level of truth for their products, I sometimes sense that the rhetoric of educational criticism as a whole implies as much. To the extent that it does, it claims more than

it can actually produce. And to that extent, the requisite selectivity of criticism limits the breadth of its usefulness. I believe this limitation is an essential one.

A second flaw in viewing the curriculum as a work of art lies in the nature of the experiences undergone by people encountering works of art and by school children. The art critic responding to an exhibit speaks as a free agent who has voluntarily gone to the museum, joined others who have chosen to go, and written an essay which may guide the perceptions of those who choose to validate this judgment against their own experiences with the works. Everyone involved is involved voluntarily; the critic's experience has at least that much in common with others'. The curriculum critic, however, cannot assume this common attitude between herself and the others encountering the same "work of art", for while the curriculum critic may choose to study that curriculum, the students generally do not. The argument advanced by Mann, Westbury, Kelly, Eisner, myself and others is that the educational critic can enlighten other educators by being able to see and communicate the nature of the experience the materials offer. But they offer it mostly to children. The principles of criticism drawn from aesthetics presume that the experience is more or less uncoerced -- that people opt to go to concerts, and actively seek out art exhibitis, and are not required by law to be there for a certain number of hours each year. Whether the critic trained under those assumptions can translate his or her perceptual skills to match the captive quality of a real curriculum in use is questionable.

Thirdly, the rhetoric of curriculum criticism and connoisseurship usually assumes that the critic/connoisseur is an adult -- a teacher, a curriculum professor, a researcher. The art critic is always an adult, as

are most readers of criticism -- critic and readers are in some sense equals, susceptible to similar reactions to the works, sharing some of the same cultural baggage and bringing equivalent densities of experience to the encounter. But if the people ultimately "encountering" the curriculum are young children, then the force of criticism in portraying their experience with it is considerably reduced. The critic can effectively portray the teacher's experience, and may have good insights into the school climate and other elements influencing adults' experience of the curriculum, but it is still difficult to see how an adult critic can accurately render into words a child's encounter with content and structure. If we seek, as Mann argued, a portrayal of the "lived-in" quality of the curriculum, can we ever really get there? I think not. Traditional educational inquiry evades this problem altogether, promising only what it can reliably produce -- measurements of teacher-student "interactions", for example, or comparisons of test scores. Criticism claims somehow more, something subtler which can be validated only by other viewers undergoing the same experience. Since the experience cannot possibly be the same for an adult Ph.D. as for a third-grade student, many of the claims that an educational critic might make about a classroom experience necessarily remain untestable. That they might still provide useful insights to other adults does not eliminate this basic limitation of criticism as a tool for understanding a curriculum's impact on children.

A second group of limitations focuses on the special role accorded the critic, and especially on the argument that the critic is somehow better informed, more perceptive, and a better judge than most of us. The concept of criticism establishes the critic as an individual whose perceptions are especially attuned to finding order and beauty in otherwise mysterious or

incomprehensible compositions. This is probably a safe assumption in the case of art criticism, especially insofar as we generally do view the arts as something separate, mysterious, and a bit intimidating. The very fact that we have museum docents, rent recorded guided tours, and publish movie reviews in small-town newspapers suggests that we are generally willing to accept guidance in our reaction to the arts. But we can less safely assume a need for critical guidance in education, where all citizens clearly feel qualified to make judgments, to suggest policy to shape the constraints on the trained professionals, and otherwise to proclaim their own expertise. The public perception of its own knowledgability, onto which the critical function is overlaid, is vastly different in the arts and in education; we may justly ask whether the curriculum critic can have the illuminating and "aha" effect that an art critic can. I would suggest that this significant difference severely limits the value of curriculum criticism for many who would otherwise stand to benefit by its judgments. That the many individuals involved in shaping curricular experiences could benefit by educational criticism if they opened themselves to it is a separate point; it remains that the presumed credibility of the curriculum critic may be based on assumptions which do not apply in the educational arena.

Related to this problem of credibility is the flip side of the same coin, the occasional charge that the concepts of curriculum criticism and "connoisseurship" are essentially elitist. It is an argument I have heard a lot. Indeed the very term "connoisseur" invites this reaction, freighted as the word is with intimations of erudition, refined taste, inaccessibility by common folks, and mysterious standards of "good art". It is difficult to fully refute these charges, for educational connoisseurship as Eisner

conceives it is a question of cultivated sensitivities and openness to out-of-the-ordinary forms of beauty. Eisner argues that all practitioners can become connoisseurs, that all jobs can be done more or less artfully and with more or less sensitivity, that connoisseurship (in any activity) is a possible and a desirable aspiration. Nonetheless, the concept seems burdened by the fact that in real life as we know it connoisseurs are few, are largely self-appointed, and tend to speak a language unfamiliar to the uninitiated (what is a "good nose" and "strong character" in a wine, anyway?). We need perhaps a folksier term.

Response

Curriculum criticism is indeed limited. It produces only a selective portrayal of educational situations, it presumes analogies between art critics and curriculum critics which may not always be justified, it attempts to play a role which may be less welcome in education than in the arts, and it invites charges of elitism which reduce its appeal in many circles. In addition, its "unscientific" nature goes against the grain of much that educators have been trying to accomplish in recent decades (though this is also part of its attractiveness). To make these criticisms, however, is not to argue that the rhetoric of curriculum criticism should be tamed nor that its intentions somehow be humbled. Art criticism has been with us for centuries, and it continues to aspire to enlighten and enrich our experience of art; curriculum criticism is a fledgling, but its aspirations are similar. If its contributions to our understanding of curricular problems are not ultimately sufficient unto themselves, and if its premises are still foreign to established models of inquiry in education, its limitations may be as much in its readers as in criticism per se.

The main qualifier which the various limitations of criticism demand is this: it is unrealistic to expect curriculum criticism to stand on its own as the sole -- or even as the major -- source of information on which curricular judgments are based. Most art critics do not provide information extraneous to the aesthetic impact of the work; they generally omit reference to the physical dimensions of paintings, insurance costs, booking costs of a dance company, scheduling constraints, accoustic requirements, or other practical details which will affect whether a local arts council will sponsor an exhibit or performance. Though the real interest in bringing an exhibit to town may be for its aesthetic appeal, the practical information is also essential. The critic's view is necessary but not sufficient. The same is true of curriculum decisions and of the critic's contribution to them. Educators will always need other kinds of data in making curricular decisions. They need to know such basic facts about a curriculum as its reading level, length, size of print, cost, sexist or racist content, results of previous implementations, shelf life, and other qualities which will affect practical decisions. Curriculum criticism does not provide this full picture. The decision to attend an exhibit or to adopt a curriculum is ultimately made by the practitioners who must live with those experiences; the critic's rendering of the experience provided by an exhibit/performance/curriculum is only part of the picture that the practitioner needs in making an informed judgment. The critic, in fact, virtually demands that his or her portrayal be reconfirmed by each viewer; criticism invites constant testing. The critic's word cannot pretend to be the last.

Aesthetic criticism applied to curriculum decisions at best can help us to see practical situations in ways we might not have been able to otherwise.

Criticism is judgment, but it is to the users of criticism to recognize that it is not necessarily the final nor even the "right" judgment. A wine connoisseur is a guide, but ultimately a lot of us will be paying for and drinking those wines; our own judgment will matter more.

The limitations of aesthetic criticism are fairly clear. I don't really believe they are any more severe than the limitations to most other modes of inquiry in education; certainly a focus on specific independent and dependent variables reflects a selectivity at least as stringent as any critic's. The limitations are crippling only if we expect too much of the method. or if we read the arguments for criticism as a claim that it somehow overrides all other sources of curriculum knowledge. The ultimate limitations of criticism in education are quite similar to those of criticism in the arts: the only real limitation is in the public's willingness to consider the judgment provided by the critic and to place it in a useful perspective. The public's willingness will be shaped by the critic's effective use of "data" and by the insightfulness of his perceptions, but it will be shaped also by the expectations it assigns to the critical function in the first place. These expectations can come only from encounters with actual pieces of criticism; the limitations of curriculum criticism stem partly from the fact that there has not yet been much of it to scrutinize, or to trust.

Our purposes in art criticism and in curriculum criticism are quite similar. They are best characterized by these two brief statements, one from John Dewey and the other from the critic, Dore Ashton:

> The function of criticism is the reeducation of perception...it is an auxiliary in the process, a difficult process, of learning to see and hear.
> (John Dewey, Art As Experience, 1958)

> Art criticism is not a science but an application of intelligent discussion. The attempt to define, rather than the definition itself, is its justification. There is an element of truth in any searching discussion of art if it serves to focus close attention on the work of art.
>
> (Dore Ashton, The Unknown Shore: A View of Contemporary Art, 1962)

In these functions of criticism lie both its power and the limits to its practical usefulness. Each mode of inquiry in education imposes its own special selectivity and responds to a certain kind of question, and while criticism is but one way of looking at a curriculum, it can be powerful. It is up to its advocates to produce enough of it that others can assess its potential.

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